

Acharya Shankara: Delineator of India

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THESE IS AN INCREASING demand for an account of Acharya Shankara's life. This is because of his influence on the religious, cultural, and philosophical life of India. There are different views regarding Acharya Shankara's birthplace, where he met his guru, when and where he wrote the *bhashyas*, commentaries, as well as the places he travelled. Some of this information is available in different books; among them Madhva-Vidyaranya's *Shankara Digvijaya* in Sanskrit is considered a unique historical and philosophical poem. An attempt is made here to show Acharya Shankara as the delineator of India according to his travels. Many temples and shrines, even today, all over the country bear testimony to his efforts towards national integration.

The Great Parivrajaka

Maps were used since ancient times for knowing locations, travel, and trade. These were prepared according to the importance of the regions. In the eleventh century CE the Persian Alu Rayhan Biruni visited India, studied its geography extensively, and wrote about its history and geology. In 1767 the East India Company established the Survey of India for mapping Indian territories, and the first map of 'Hindustan' was prepared by the then Surveyor General in 1785.

In the eighth century Acharya Shankara gave us another kind of India's map through his journeys, in which he propagated the Advaita philosophy. This is confirmed from his own works and those of other contemporary teachers and acharyas. Through these works we have a picture of the social, cultural, and philosophical life of

the country. During Acharya Shankara's time the means of transport were very limited. He is generally shown travelling mostly on foot, which today seems dreadful, but it was a victory march for Advaita Vedanta. The Acharya travelled like all ordinary pilgrims had done for centuries: meeting dangers, eating whatever was available, and resting at any convenient place. However, being a *paramahansa parivrajaka*, the supreme stage of a wandering sannyasin, he was the symbol of the highest spiritual experience a human being can achieve, and thus he travelled and lived as one.

After receiving permission to become a sannyasi from his mother, he started his journey from Kalady in the centre of Kerala, where he was born, towards the north in search of a guru. He eventually reached the river Narmada near Omkareshvar, now in Madhya Pradesh, where he met Govinda Bhagavatpada and accepted him as his guru. How a young boy travelled such a long distance from Kerala to Omkareshvar amazes people even today. Here he composed and recited the *Narmada-ashtaka* praising Narmada. From here he travelled to Kashi, or Varanasi, through Prayaga, or Allahabad, both in present-day Uttar Pradesh. Kashi is known as the *moksha-puri*, city of liberation, and is visited by a large number of seekers of liberation as well as pundits. In Kashi he stayed at the Manikarnika Ghat and wrote the *Manikarnika-ashtakam*. Acharya Shankara also wrote here the *Manisha-panchakam* and various hymns on Shiva. At Varanasi he met Padmapada, his first disciple.

After travelling long distances through difficult and dangerous forest tracks, he reached the

holy Badrinath, or Badri-Narayana, in the Himalayas, now in Uttarakhand. Here he wrote all his sublime *bhashyas*. His route to Badrinath took him through Hasthinapura, Delhi, Haridwar, and Rishikesh. Badarikashrama is modern Badrinath, a village fifty-five miles northeast of the present Srinagar, in Uttarakhand. From there, after finishing writing the *bhashyas* and discovering lost shrines in the Himalayas, he returned to Kashi. There in Kashi he met, in a divine vision, Vyasa, the author of the *Brahma Sutra*, who quizzed the acharya regarding his interpretation on the text. After being blessed by Vyasa he started his journey to Prayaga, where the rivers Ganga and Yamuna mingle, to meet Kumarila Bhatta, the great Mimamsaka versed in the 'Karma Kanda', ritual section, of the Vedas. After visiting holy places like Kurukshetra, Indraprastha, and Mathura he reached Vrindavan, where he wrote the *Govinda-ashtakam*. Acharya Shankara and his disciples then returned to Prayaga. From there they travelled to the city of Mahishmati, in Madhya Pradesh, to meet Mandana Mishra. Mandana was defeated by Acharya Shankara in a debate and became his disciple, Sureshvara. Mandana's wife Uma Bharati was the moderator of the debate.

Dig-Vijaya, Conquest of the Quarters

Acharya Shankara passed through Maharashtra, where he propagated his doctrines and controverted non-Vedic creeds. Stage by stage he reached a great place of pilgrimage called Shrishailam on the banks of the river Krishna, in Andhra Pradesh. Shrishailam is famous for its peaks and a Shiva temple known as Mallikarjuna along with that of Bhramara-ambika. This is narrated by the Acharya in a stotra.¹

From Shrishailam the Acharya and his disciples reached the holy place of Gokarna, in Karnataka, on the seashore and visited Hari-shankara Kshetra too. After having adored and

praised Hari-Shankara he proceeded further south to the shrine of Mookambika, which is eighty miles away from Mangalore. Adoring the Divine Mother as Mookambika he stayed there for many days. Even now there is a cave believed to be the one used by Acharya Shankara on his way to the temple.

From Mookambika he voyaged to the village of Sreebali, a village of brahmanas where every house performed the Vedic Agnihotra yajna. There he met Hastamalaka, who became his disciple. With his disciples he then travelled to Sringeri near the river Tungabhadra, where he met the disciple Totaka. While at Sringeri the Acharya had a yogic insight about his mother's last days. Telling this to his disciples he then travelled to Kalady to see her for the last time.

After performing the last rites to his mother, he started on a *digvijaya*, conquest of the quarters. At first he travelled through Ananta-shayana, modern Thiruvananthapuram, Suchindram, Kanyakumari, Tiruchirappalli, and reached Rameshwaram, where he worshipped Ramanatha Shiva.²

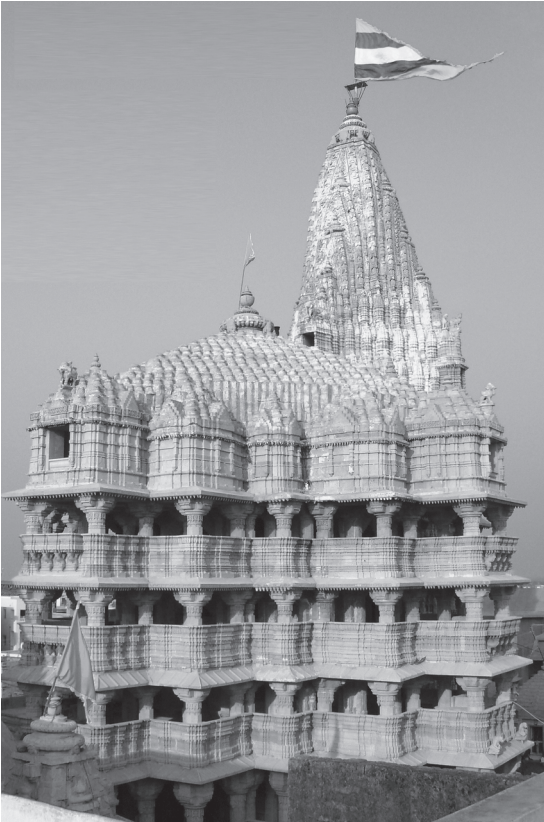
As a symbol of his visit, a shrine of Acharya Shankara was built between the temple of the Devi and the bathing ghat at end of India, Kanyakumari. It is claimed that his *Saundaryalahari* was written at Kanyakumari—some of



*Vidyashankara temple
at Sringeri, Karnataka*

its verses can be considered as an evidence of it being composed there, like: ‘The dust of your feet is the island city from where takes places the luminous sunrise of spiritual illumination driving away the overcasting darkness of ignorance in the hearts of devotees.’³ In this verse the word *dvipa-nagari* denotes cape Kanyakumari. The forty-eighth verse states: ‘Oh mother, your right eye being the sun creates day and your left being the moon creates night.’ In India both the sunrise and sunset can be seen only at Kanyakumari. On the full moon days the setting sun and rising moon can be simultaneously seen at Kanyakumari. However, tradition has it that the Acharya transported himself to Kailash and there on the wall found written this hymn to the Divine Mother. As he read it, Ganesha began erasing the hymn from below so that the highly esoteric meaning was not made public in this world.

The images of Shan Mata, six deities, ratify that Acharya Shankara visited the temple at Suchindram. His composition *Panduranga-ashtakam* in praise of Ranganatha mentions his



visit to the temple at Tiruchirappalli. He journeyed through the Pandya and Chola countries and reached Kanchipuram, which shone like an ornament to the Hasthi ranges.⁴

Again entering Andhra Pradesh and worshipping Venkatanatha, he reached the land of Vidarbha in eastern Maharashtra. After this he headed for Karnataka and reached Gokarnam, north Karnataka, and defeated Nilakantha, the great Shaiva saint. He then travelled to Saurashtra in Gujarat and adjacent places, to finally reach the city of Dwaraka.⁵

After having defeated in arguments the sects of Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas, and Sauras he proceeded to the city of Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. There he defeated in a debate the great scholar Bhattabhaskara. He spread his teachings in the country of Surasena in Uttar Pradesh, and subsequently he had triumphant tours through the lands of Darada, in the Kashmir valley along the river Sindhu; Bharata and Kuru, in the area of Haryana, Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh; Panchala, in the northern regions along the Ganga and the Yamuna; and others. In Panchala he defeated the followers of Prabhakara Bhatta and Harsha. From there the Acharya went to Kamarupa in Assam, where he was victorious over Navagupta, a Shakta thinker. There is a shrine of Acharya Shankara at Kamakhya temple in Assam.

Acharya Shankara finished his preaching in the northern region and then proceeded through the lands of Koshala in Uttar Pradesh, Anga—which was in the eastern part of India in the sixth century until it was taken over by Magadha, Bihar—to Gauda, Bengal. In Gauda he won over scholars like Murari Mishra and Udayana and triumphed over Dharmagupta. He reached the banks of the Ganga, where he heard about *sarvajna pitha*, the seat of omniscience, at the Sharada temple in Kashmir. So he went to

Dwarkadhish temple
at Dwaraka, Gujarat



Kashmir, and after many debates won the seat. After this crowning triumph he left for Badrinath with some of his disciples, while deputing others to Sringeri and other places. The acharya also went to Kedarnath, the holy place of Shiva in the Himalayas. He never returned from there and, according to legend, he merged in Shiva.

Culmination of a Great Life


Within his short lifespan of thirty-two years, his doctrine of *brahma-vidya*, knowledge of Brahman, which confers moksha, spread all over the country, from Rameshwaram in the south to the northern boundaries marked by the Himalayas, from the eastern mountains where the sun rises to those of the west where it sets.

His discussions were not confined to the upper castes. There were men and women of all castes and classes who had engaged in discussion with him. Even the difference of language between the north and south did not prove a barrier to this interaction. His interactions with different scholars in Sanskrit, which was the common language of the learned throughout the country, helped bring out the essential unity of India even during that time.

Thus the sublime teachings of Advaita Vedanta were defended by his tremendous spirituality. Acharya Shankara remodelled Hinduism and eradicated Buddhism, which in India had degenerated, along with numerous ritualistic sects that had swerved from the path of the Vedas.

*Badrinarayana temple
at Badrinath, Uttarakhand*

In order to safeguard the principles and teachings of Advaita and also to culturally unite India he established four Mathas, monasteries, at four different parts of India—Sringeri in the south, Dwaraka in the west, Puri in the east, and Jyoti near Badrinath in the north. If we join these four places we get a square. Interestingly, Rameshwaram in the south and Badrinath in the north lie on the same longitude; similarly, Dwaraka and Puri lie on the same latitude, approximately having the same distance. His *Jagannatha-ashtakam* describes his visit to Puri in Odisha, which is also known as Jagannatha-puri.⁶

His stotras evince his visits to these places. While reading them one has the impression that he was standing in front of the deities when he composed and sang them. The verbs are in present tense. His works narrate the sacred places of pilgrimage—the icy cave of Amarnath, Prayaga, Ganga, Dwaraka, and so on. They also give an insight into old Indian temple architecture and art. His works also reveal his genius and vision of the geographical and cultural unity of India. From all this we can affirm that Acharya Shankara is the delineator of India. 

References

1. Acharya Shankara, *Bhramarapakashtakam*, 1.
2. See Acharya Shankara, *Dvadasha-linga Stotra*, 11.
3. See Acharya Shankara, *Saundarya Lahari*, 3.
4. See Vidyananya, *Shankara-digvijaya*, 15.4.
5. See *Dvadasha-linga Stotra*, 1.
6. See Acharya Shankara, *Jagannathashtakam*, 3.

